

Mentoring: An Investment in Positive Youth Outcomes



UNDERSTANDING MENTORING

WHAT IS YOUTH MENTORING?

Definition: Mentoring is a development strategy for a youth's successful path to adulthood. In a structured mentoring program, a supportive individual works with a youth to build a relationship by offering guidance, support, and encouragement to cultivate the youth's positive and healthy development. Often, mentoring programs are designed around specific goals, such as academic achievement, career preparation, and behavior modification.¹

Mentoring programs also often focus on youth perceived to be at risk in a number of domains such as education, workforce development, and juvenile justice. The risk factors that place youth along a low- to high-risk continuum include, but are not limited to, being disconnected from school and/or work, lagging in academic achievement, lacking positive role models, being involved in the justice system, and transitioning out of foster care.

It is widely accepted that youth, especially those perceived to be at risk, benefit significantly by having a mentor in their lives. Mentors provide youth with the confidence, resources, continuity, and support they need to achieve their potential. The more dependable individuals youth have in their lives, the more likely they are to develop external and internal assets—structures, relationships, values, skills, and beliefs that promote healthy development and lead to future success. A high-quality mentoring relationship maximizes the development of these positive assets, and the subsequent positive outcomes for youth.

WHAT IS HIGH-QUALITY MENTORING?

Often, the presence of a mentor is critical in the positive development and growth of a youth. Mentors can build a high-quality relationship by:^{2,3,4}

- Establishing goals and objectives
- Creating an emotional bond and/or connection
- Building trust
- Fostering support
- Meeting the youth's expectations
- Placing the needs of the youth first
- Honoring the commitment to the relationship

A mentoring relationship that includes these features is likely to create a strong and meaningful connection that can positively influence the youth's development, and transition to adulthood, while improving communities and societies as a whole. The National Dropout Prevention Center states that "mentoring changes the structure and institutional boundaries of the community and the vision of the mentee. It serves as a powerful human force in a school, community, or state that can change the vision, health, or the economic base of the community."⁵

Mentors are one of the many critical resources in facilitating the social-emotional, cognitive, and behavioral development of a youth by continuously and consistently providing support and guidance.⁶ In addition to one-on-one mentoring, recent trends demonstrate that these relationships take many forms, such as group settings and formal or informal structures. Within these mediums, the mentor-mentee relationship can be peer-to-peer, adult-to-youth, or even youth initiated, where the youth identifies his or her mentor. In order to leverage technological advances, many programs also complement face-to-face mentoring with online support.⁷

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Mentoring programs that follow the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring are more likely to build high-impact and lasting mentoring relationships that result in positive outcomes for the youth.⁸ These elements include:

- **Recruiting mentors and mentees** to set realistic expectations regarding a mentoring relationship and what it can achieve
- **Screening mentors** to assess suitability for a mentoring relationship and ensure the youth's safety
- **Training mentors** to provide knowledge and skills needed to build an effective mentoring relationship
- **Matching mentors and mentees based on shared background and interest** to increase the odds that the mentoring relationship will endure
- **Monitoring and supporting the relationship** to offer ongoing advice, problem-solving support, and training opportunities
- **Facilitating closure of the relationship** to end the mentoring constructively and assess progress

MENTORING: A CRITICAL SUPPORT STRATEGY

There are thousands of youth development programs in the United States today that serve millions of youth across different social issue areas, including education, workforce development, and juvenile justice. When implemented consistently, mentoring is an instrumental strategy that is integrated into these programs that help youth perceived to be most at risk successfully transition to adulthood.

EDUCATION: DECREASING TRUANCY

Mentoring has proven to help youth achieve academic success, for example, by reducing school truancy rates. According to the U.S. Department of Education, one in four students drops out before he or she finishes high school—that is one every 26 seconds or more than one million students a year.⁹ According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, high school dropouts

from 2006–2007 cost the U.S. economy approximately \$329 billion in lost wages, taxes, and lifetime productivity. Dropouts are also more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system, rely on public programs and social services, and go without health insurance than those who graduate from high school.¹⁰ However, formal mentoring integrated with tutoring, counseling, and other safety-net services can drive a reduction in school truancy, leading to active interest in the youth's daily life, greater connection with the school, and improved academic performance.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: INCREASING EMPLOYMENT SKILLS

Mentoring programs increase youths' self-confidence and self-efficacy and improve their attitudes about the future, ultimately increasing their odds of successful employment.¹¹ In particular, career-focused mentoring programs introduce the youth to the "world of work" that may not otherwise be available to them. These programs also help youth to build employment skills, such as professionalism, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and interpersonal and soft skills. These programs may also give

youth the opportunity to explore various careers, understand the connection between education and future success, and gain practical work experience in a professional setting to prepare for life as an adult.¹²

JUVENILE JUSTICE: DECREASING YOUTH VIOLENCE

Mentoring is fifth out of 31 strategies for its rate of success in preventing criminal violent behavior; out of those five, it is also the most cost effective strategy.¹³ Research shows that at-risk youth who are connected to caring individuals are more likely to resist negative influences than their peers who are not in a supportive relationship.¹⁴ For example, research suggests that youth with mentors are significantly less likely to ever carry a weapon than youth without mentors.¹⁵ Mentoring programs help youth to resist or mitigate the risk factors of violence and enhance skills that lead to healthy and positive lives, making them essential components of an effective youth violence prevention strategy.

ROLE OF MENTOR AND ITS MENTORING PARTNERSHIPS

MENTOR

MENTOR works to support youth by providing a public voice, driving investment of time and money into high-impact mentoring, and promoting quality mentoring through the development and delivery of standards, cutting-edge research, and state-of-the-art tools. MENTOR works simultaneously to build the infrastructure to advance the quality and quantity of mentoring programs across the country while also working to raise awareness and advance a common mentoring agenda. MENTOR works in collaboration with its growing national network of over 25 Mentoring Partnerships, which lead innovation and advocacy and provide capacity building support to mentoring programs in their local communities.

MENTORING PARTNERSHIPS

Mentoring Partnerships assess a local community's mentoring needs and then design and implement a local or statewide plan to:

- Significantly increase the number of youth in quality mentoring relationships
- Multiply and leverage the human, financial, and in-kind resources dedicated to mentoring programs and initiatives

- Ensure quality standards in all mentoring efforts, particularly in alignment with the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring
- Statistically expand the capacity of organizations to start, sustain, and grow mentoring efforts

Mentoring Partnerships serve as "mentoring central" and coordinate a wide range of services such as training, technical assistance, designing public policy campaigns, leading broad-based mentor recruitment campaigns, and collecting data to identify trends and gaps. These efforts help mentoring programs leverage limited resources, avoid duplication of efforts, and capitalize on opportunities to aggregate and deliver key program services efficiently. The result is greater communication and collaboration, more high-quality mentoring programs, smarter use of resources, and most importantly, more young people matched in high-quality mentoring relationships. When less than 20 percent of mentoring programs have national headquarters to turn to for capacity building and technical assistance support, MENTOR and Mentoring Partnerships are extremely vital for the realization of a national agenda of increasing the number of youth in high-quality mentoring relationships.

REFERENCES

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⁴ T. Tai and D. Shapiro, interview by Ankita Gandhi, December 20, 2012, Boston, MA.

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⁹ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. "The Condition of Education 2011" (2011). http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_scr.asp.

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¹⁵ The EMT Group, Inc., "When Stakes Are High: Research-Based Mentoring for Youth with Multiple Risk Factors" (2003).

ABOUT MENTOR

MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership is the unifying champion for expanding quality youth mentoring relationships in the United States, and our work over the last two decades has helped millions of young people find the support and guidance they need to build productive and meaningful lives.

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